

Organizing Mock Election Activities at the District Level

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OBJECTIVES

Through planning mock election activities at a district level, you can expect to:

1. reinforce classroom lessons with active participation.
2. develop students' research skills.
3. develop students' ability to classify information.
4. develop students' writing skills.
5. develop students' verbal skills.
6. develop students' critical thinking skills in relation to a political election.
7. enable students to learn voting procedures.
8. involve the community in the work of schools.
9. motivate eligible and future voters.

METHODS

The responsibilities of a district coordinator include the following:

1. Inform schools early.
2. Involve all schools in planning.
3. Facilitate the efforts of the school coordinator.
4. Help determine classroom activities.
5. Involve the media.
6. Involve parents and community members.
7. Evaluate and follow up.

1. Inform schools early.

As an organizer of a district mock election, you must inform your schools. The earlier you do this, the more time you will have to plan and disseminate mock election activities and resources to persons coordinating mock elections in individual schools. If necessary, create a team of teachers, parents, and students that actively supports the mock election and the information necessary to garner support: what the mock election is, who participates, and what the benefits are. Ask the superintendent for his or her endorsement of the mock election and communicate that endorsement to district principals. Be sure to contact school administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and others who might be interested in the mock election as well.

Once you have gained general support in the district, develop a list of coordinators at each school who will inform their school about the mock election and take responsibility for administering mock election activities in their school. These teachers can also provide you with support and advice, accompany you to public meetings, help you draft mock election materials, and more!

2. Involve all schools in planning.

Invite schools to help you plan the district's project so they have ownership of it. The earlier you let them know, the more time you will have to plan and disseminate plans and resources for mock election activities to persons coordinating the effort in individual schools.

To get the word out to the schools, write letters, use newsletters, and design and distribute flyers and posters. Be sure your initial information answers these questions:

- ★ What is a mock election?
- ★ What will students do?
- ★ What is the purpose of the event?
- ★ When will it take place?
- ★ What are the outcomes?
- ★ Why hold a district mock election?

- ★ What specific things will a mock election do for students in your district?

Although there are numerous approaches to involving all of a school district's schools in a mock election, be systematic. Try the following three-stage approach:

- ★ Assume that all schools want to participate in the mock election. Inform all schools of the event. Communicate with each school as if each has said, "Yes, our students will be involved." If you hit strong resistance or get no response, you may want to move on to the next stage.
- ★ After a few days or a week have passed, send mock election information to those persons having direct authority over the schools. If time pressure is a factor, ignore this procedure.
- ★ Finally, communicate with the general superintendent, either by direct or indirect methods. You can be quite deliberate here. If you have the superintendent's strong endorsement of the mock election project, communicate his or her endorsement to schools.

As your plans progress, be sure new information and updates reach each school, department head, school administrator, superintendent, teacher, and student. Circulate information to everyone who has expressed interest in mock election activities as well as those with direct authority over schools (e.g., principals).

Continue to publicize the project through flyers and posters (these are great for student design competitions!); announcements in school newsletters and publications; teachers' mailboxes, publications, and meetings; and community and school bulletin boards (at the post office, in local publications and newspapers). (See Chapter 4.)

If you have made all attempts to get all schools involved and have failed, still think of yourself as being in the wait-and-see phase. You can use some of your time to continue checking and rechecking to find out whether nonresponsive schools want to be involved. Remain actively engaged in trying to give all students in all schools the mock election experience. It's worth your time.

Try to provide an opportunity for as many students to participate in the mock election as possible. Be sure those who are invited to participate in your event understand your purpose! Do not become frustrated by a lack of response; sometimes several invitations are what it takes.

Create an open environment by welcoming the suggestions of others as well as by allowing schools to “come on board” at any stage in the planning process, even those that may have been disinterested initially. You might consider sending out a “resources needed form” to mock election participants to find out what resources they need and how you might help them.

3. Facilitate the efforts of the school coordinator.

A critical phase of mock election activities is planning and organization by school coordinators who will be responsible for implementing the mock election and voter education activities in their schools. Give preliminary directions carefully, familiarizing yourself and others with pertinent information and critical dates. Set timelines for the implementation of all mock election activities in the schools. Activities for the school coordinator include the following:

- ★ With the principal, decide whether all teachers will participate. Remember that the mock election is an opportunity to involve multiple disciplines. English teachers, art teachers, math teachers, and science teachers, as well as social studies teachers, have much to gain. Also decide how activities and lessons will be implemented: Will voter education events/lessons take place daily or weekly? Will events and activities include the entire school or individual classrooms?
- ★ Distribute information, ballots, recommended activities, and resource materials to teachers.
- ★ Keep a record of the types of mock election activities that are being implemented, as well as how many students are participating at each grade level.

- ★ Contact the District Coordinator for the latest briefing information and materials that may be helpful. (Materials should be sent to all school coordinators periodically.)
- ★ Select students (election officials) to collect tallies of election results from each class, or from the polling station within the school.
- ★ Compile the election results from each class to produce the school’s election results. Select students to call in the results to the District Mock Election Headquarters.

When recommending activities, be economical. Inviting candidates to speak at schools and allowing students to register people to vote will cost very little money, if any at all. Asking local businesses for in kind help will also keep down costs. (See Chapter 12 for more information on involving local organizations in your efforts.)

4. Help determine classroom activities.

Exercise care in selecting mock election activities that will yield the best learning outcomes. Some suggestions for possible classroom activities include the following:

- ★ Invite candidates or their representatives to speak to a class or school. Be sure that all candidates from all political parties are given the same opportunity to speak.
- ★ Distribute ballots to students to take home and discuss with their parents. This will open a dialogue between students and parents regarding whether or not parents have registered to vote, the candidates and issues themselves, as well as how the issues could directly affect them, their daily lives and lifestyle. Send ballots home before mock election voting day so that parents can vote.
- ★ Arrange field trips to campaign offices where students can interview candidates and campaign workers and collect information and campaign materials.

- ★ Organize weekly discussions about the issues (from health care to safety to flat taxes) and arrange for one of the discussions to be aired on a local TV station. (See Chapters 6 and 7 for more ideas.)
- ★ Allow students to make posters to remind people to vote, perhaps local businesses will display the posters.
- ★ Allow students to take a poll or survey in the community and do some actual data collecting. Put numbers from the phone book in the computer and, on the basis of a sampling of the 100 families called, have students predict the winner of a political race.
- ★ Distribute shoe boxes to each participating class for collection of election news clippings. At the end of each week the best educational articles should be displayed on a centrally-located bulletin board. At the end of three weeks, the class with the most clippings should be treated to a popcorn party.
- ★ Do a pre- and post-test on voting requirements and procedures. Teach facts on voting requirements and procedures.
- ★ Bridge the “intergenerational gap” by organizing an Adopt-a-Grandparent Day to inform and invite grandparent participation in mock election activities.
- ★ Conduct a schoolwide orientation (especially for “first voting” students) of an actual election booth provided by county elections office.
- ★ Set up a polling station in a designated place in each school or classroom. The voting area should be decorated and patriotic music played while students wait to cast their ballots. Emphasize secret balloting—each student should be given privacy to vote.
- ★ Encourage students to participate in a “Get Out the Vote” campaign in their local neighborhoods. (See Chapter 11.)
- ★ Create a model senate to meet and debate public issues in homeroom, over lunch periods or in class. (Students need to be informed as they will cast their ballots on mock election day for national issues as well as for candidates.)
- ★ Involve students in the study of propaganda techniques used in TV ads and vocabulary relating to elections and the democratic process.
- ★ Encourage students to follow the events leading up to the real election on November 7, 2000, by reading the press. (See Chapter 5.)
- ★ Invite political candidates to a reception to meet and mix with their future constituents.
- ★ Distribute election information to the students, i.e., candidates’ biographies, issue sheets, overviews of the election process, and brief descriptions of the elective offices themselves.
- ★ Conduct simulated voter registration with students under 18 years of age.
- ★ Create a bulletin board on which students can post for discussion political cartoons and political advertisements collected from newspapers and magazines.
- ★ Invoke classroom discussions about voting and elections: “Why do you think some people don’t vote?” Generate an extensive list of answers on the board or overhead projector. After reviewing the list, ask students to brainstorm ideas to increase voter turn-out in elections. Conclude by having each student write a one-page essay supporting one of the ideas.
- ★ Invite the League of Women Voters to come to talk about the responsibilities of voting.
- ★ Organize all “first vote” students (18 years and older) for participation in a Legacy Ceremony, in which senior citizens pass on to new voters the legacy of one’s right and responsibility to vote.

- ★ Decorate empty store fronts or polling places for the election (“Fairmont students say thanks for caring!”) in red, white, and blue or Uncle Sam motifs.
- ★ After the real election in November, compare and discuss the election results of the real and mock elections. Continue to follow current events and reinforce the importance of voting and students’ responsibilities as citizens.
- ★ Encourage drama classes or clubs to prepare skits or dramatizations about voting or famous political speeches. Present them at Chamber of Commerce meetings, nursing homes, or other schools. (See Chapter 13 for additional suggestions for classroom activities.)

5. Involve the media.

Your local media can be a great ally in gaining supporters for the mock election and mock election activities. (See Chapter 4 for more information on this topic.)

6. Involve community members and parents.

Find creative ways to collaborate with other people and organizations, such as having members of the local chapter of the Bar Association talk with students about individual rights, or developing mentor relationships with local lawyers or public officials.

Invite community and family members to participate in the education of their youth. Circulate announcements and flyers or assign students to solicit at least one family or community volunteer. (See Chapter 12.)

Community and family members can also be great sources of public support. Ask parents and community volunteers and sponsors to write letters to the principal or superintendent or to public officials supporting mock election activities and the efforts of participants. Parents might also schedule meetings with educators to discuss mock election activities. Parent involvement will help reinforce the lessons and skills students learn in school.

7. Evaluate and follow up.

After the event, gather your supporters and participants to discuss the level of participation. What did the most successful schools do differently from other schools? How might you enroll new schools? How can you improve future events? What other types of events might you like to try?

Also encourage participating teachers to evaluate the activities themselves. Were activities constructive? Did students take an active role in planning and implementing activities? What did students learn? What did students like most/least? (See Chapter 2.)

Suggest that school coordinators report their activities to the National Student/Parent Mock Election committee (see page vii), or submit their efforts for a national award (see Appendix 1).

The new National Standards for Civics and Government stress active participation in the learning process as well as a set of concepts that students at each grade level should be able to explain. Mock election activities can help educators meet these goals. For example, the standards state that students should be able to explain the most important responsibilities of their local government. This is particularly important because citizens are most intimately involved with the government on the local level. The standards further suggest that teachers enlist the help of public officials to meet this goal. See the new standards, Section III.